The THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

BULLETIN SEVENTY-ONE SPRING, 1960

HENRY DAVID THOREAU: A DISCUSSION OF HIS USE OF THE TERMS "Nature" AND "nature."

by Robert S. Dickens (Johns Hopkins University)

"The trees and shrubs rear white arms to the sky on every side; and where were walls and fences, we see fantastic forms stretching in frolic gambols across the dusky landscape, as if Nature had strewn her fresh designs over the fields by night as as models for man's art." 1/
"The moon now rises to her absolute rule, And the husbandmen and hunter Acknowledge her for their mistress."2/

It is my contention that Thoreau distinguished between "nature" and "Nature." I also maintain that this distinction is clearly evident in his writings. There are probably cases in which the distinction does not hold; however, these are few in number, and many of them are probably cases where the reader misunderstands Thoreau and not cases of a lack of the distinction, at all.

The term "nature" is used to connote all of the external world excluding human beings and their works; it is a place where one can commune with God and "Nature," and is full and abundant as well as being a beautiful and simple manifestation or part of "Nature," which he loved. This term is often discussed in purely descriptive or scientific terms.

"Nature," though lower than God, transcends both man and "nature" and creates the phenomena of "nature"; "Nature" is always spoken of in feminine terms, is knowable and is a source of morality. She is purposeful and manifests her purpose in the wildness, primitiveness, beauty and abundance of "nature." This is the exclusive sense.

"Nature" is also "nature," as is evident in A Week. However, "Nature" is never merely "nature," for she is always the transcending spirit also. Thus, over-simplified, the distinction is that "Nature" is always more than "nature." This is the inclusive sense.

Now let us look at some of the places where this distinction is evident.

"There are two worlds, the post-office and nature. I know them both. I continually forget mankind and their institutions, as I do a bank."3/

This passage clearly indicates that, to Thoreau, man and his works were in no way a part of nature.

"There is a fine ripple and sparkle on the pond, seen through the mist. But what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base?...The remembrance of the baseness of politicians spoils my walks. ... I endeavor in vain to observe nature ..." 4/

This passage again shows the difference between nature and man or man's works, and that the two may often be in opposition. Further, it shows that nature is diametrically opposed to baseness, as it should be since it is a manifestation or part of Nature, which is a source of morality.

The next passage is interesting because Thoreau is often passed off as a sort of sentimental "nature lover." True, Thoreau was a nature lover, but his love for nature was not the sort of sentimental affection which is too often ascribed to him, as this passage will show.

"How rarely a man's love for nature becomes a ruling principle with him, like a youth's affection for a maiden, but more enduring! All nature is my bride. That nature which to one is a stark and ghastly solitude is a sweet, tender, and genial society to another." 5/

This shows how Thoreau expected people to love nature; their love should be "like a youth's affection for a maiden, but more enduring!" 6/ Also, Thoreau lists some of the qualities which nature has when observed correctly -- sweetness, tenderness and geniality. These will be seen to be consistent with nature's relation to "Nature."

"The water on Walden has been flowing into the holes cut for pickerel and others. It has carried with it, apparently from the surface, a sort of dust that collects on the surface, which produces a dirty or grayish-brown foam. It lies sometimes several feet wide, quite motionless on the surface of the shallow water above the ice, and is very agreeably and richly figured, like the hide of some strange beast -- how cheap these colors in nature! ... I stooped to pick it up once or twice, - now like bowels overlying one another, now like tripe, now like flames, i.e., in form, with the free, bold touch of Nature." 7/

Here, both terms are used. First, Thoreau speaks of colors in nature -- the external world. Then he speaks of Nature as having created the colors. It is certain he made the distinction here!

"To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself."8/

The sunrise is a phenomenon of nature merely, but Thoreau is most concerned with Nature. However, Nature and nature are intimately connected so that he can anticipate the sunrise in order to anticipate Nature.

"If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity than others." 9/

"A lover of Nature is preeminently a lover of man." 10/

I have previously intimated that Nature was a source of morality for Thoreau. It is impossible to love Nature in baseness as these passages point out.

"We soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy. ...The redbird which is the last of Nature is but the first of God." 11/

The first sentence is an overstatement, as Thoreau was fond of making, but it gets the point across -- Nature is less than God. This passage is also a good example of how Nature was always spoken of in feminine terms, by Thoreau.

"The intellect of most men is barren. They neither fertilize nor are fertilized. It is the marriage of the soul with Nature that makes the intellect fruitful, that gives birth to

IF THIS LINE IS CHECKED WITH RED, YOUR MEMBERSHIP HAS EXPIRED. RENEWAL: ONE DOLLAR. LIFE: $25.00.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2013

http://archive.org/details/thoreausocietyb196071unse

imagination. When we were dead and dry as the highway, some sense which has been healthily fed will put us in relation with Nature, in sympathy with her... and suddenly the sky is one rainbow, is full of music and fragrance and flavor." 12/

This passage shows beautifully that, in some way, Nature is knowable. She is also the necessary element for our knowing anything else.

"In short, Nature seemed to have adorned herself for our departure with a profusion of fringes and curls, mingled with the bright tints of flowers reflected over the water." 13/

Here we see Nature used in the more inclusive sense. Nature is nature together with the necessary transcendental attributes, i.e., creativeness.

"Though man's life is mean and trivial, Nature is holy and heroic." 14/

In this passage it is obvious that Nature is far above man; she is truly transcendental while man is relatively trivial.

In order to be of any use as a tool for help in understanding Thoreau's ideas, the distinction must be capable of being meaningfully applied to his writings. In the absence of mechanical proof, there are at least three cases which will test the meaningfulness of the distinction: (a) Passages in which Nature appears as the first word in a sentence. (b) Passages where neither term - nature or Nature - is used, but one, or both, of the ideas is discussed. (c) Passages in which one or both of the terms is used but the import of the passage is unclear with respect to either term, as commonly employed. I will give examples of how the distinction can be applied in each of the above instances.

As my first case, I will take what is perhaps the least important, the instance where one of the terms is used at the beginning of a sentence so that it is impossible to attach any other significance to the capitalization.

"It is pleasant to remember those quiet Sabbath mornings by remote stagnant rivers and ponds, where pure white water-lilies, just expanded, not yet infested by insects, float on the waveless water and perfume the atmosphere. Nature never appears more serene and innocent and fragrant. A hundred white lilies, open to the sun, rest on the surface smooth as oil amid their pads, while devil's needles are glancing over them." 15/

In the absence of feminine terms, and any utterance suggesting a transcending aspect to the observed phenomena, we can see Thoreau is speaking of nature.

"Nature must be viewed humanly to be viewed at all; that is, her scenes must be associated with humane affections. ..." 16/

The fact that Thoreau speaks in feminine terms makes it obvious that Nature is the topic of discussion. In this case Nature is used as nature plus transcendental attributes, i.e., source of morality.

"Nature loves variety in all things, and so she adds glow-worms to butterflies. ..." 17/

The feminine terms give this one away also. Here Nature is used in more transcendental terms - as creator - without specific reference to nature being subsumed in the term Nature.

The second case is of more importance. It is, I think, a crucial test of the applicability of the distinction, for, here it is to be applied when neither term is used.

"Lysimachia stricta, uprite loosestrife, now well out, by Hosmer's Pond and elsewhere, a rather handsome flower or cylindrical raceme of flowers. The Castema vesca, with cream-colored flowers, seen from afar, and the small green burs just forming. It is covered with insects, now that tree flowers are scarce. ..." 18/

The scientific and descriptive terms, and the lack of any suggestion of transcendental attributes, makes it apparent that nature is being described.

"I forgot to say yesterday that I picked four pignuts by the squirrel's hole, from which he had picked the meat, having gnawed a hole about half the diameter of the nut in width on each side ... in each case the holes were on the sides of the nut. ... When I cut holes on the sides, not only the partitions I met were thin and partial, but I struck the meats broadside and extracted them with less trouble. It may be that it is most convenient for the squirrel to hold the nut thus, but I think there is a deeper reason than this." 19/

This selection suggests purposefulness throughout; the reference to "a deeper reason" at the end confirms that Thoreau is here talking about Nature.

The third case is, perhaps, more obvious than the second, and it will undoubtedly often be useful to clarify.Thoreau's meaning by applying the distinction in cases where the import of a statement is not clear and he uses one or both of the terms.

"Day before yesterday I looked at the mangled and blackened bodies of men which had been blown up by powder, and felt that the lives of men were not innocent, and that there was an avenging power in nature. Today I hear this immortal melody, while the west wind is blowing balmily on my cheek, and methinks a roseate sunset is preparing. Are there not two powers?" 20/

This is a rather confusing passage. One ordinarily thinks of Thoreau as a sentimental lover of nature, who could only see good in nature, but in this passage Thoreau intimates that there might be an avenging power in nature, as well as Nature's spirit. This, at first, sounds rather "un-Thoreaulike." However, nature is the external world exluding man and his works. Though it is a work of Nature, it is still often opposed to man, so, it is not inconsistent to think of a power in nature - perhaps Nature herself - which can avenge man's misdeeds. It can be seen, I hope, how the knowledge of the distinction helps clarify the purport of this passage.

"If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the particular results at that point. Now we know only a few laws, and our result is vitiated, not, of course, by any confusion or irregularity in Nature, but by our ignorance of essential elements in the calculation." 21/

This is my final example. Nature seems to be used in two senses here -- "laws of Nature" and "not ... by confusion ... in Nature" -- which, at first seems confusing. However, in terms of the two senses - inclusive and exclusive - of Nature, it becomes clear that the first mention of Nature is the inclusive sense. The

passage is now less confusing.

[1]Carl Bode (ed.), "A Winter Walk," The Portable Thoreau, (New York, 1957), p. 58.
[2]Carl Bode (ed.), Collected Poems of Henry Thoreau, (Chicago, 1943), p. 136.
[3]Bradford Torrey and Francis Allen (eds.), The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau, v. IV (Boston, 1949), p. 446. (January 3, 1853).
[4] Ibid., v. VI, p. 358. (June 16, 1854.
[5] Ibid., v. IX, p. 337. (April 23, 1857).
[6] Italics mine.
[7] Ibid., v. VI, p. 66. (January 13, 1854).
[8] Bode (ed.),"Walden," loc. cit., p. 272.
[9] Torrey and Allen, op. cit., v. VII, p. 514 (Oct. 23, 1855).
[10] Ibid., v. IV., p. 163 (June 30, 1852).
[11] Ibid., v. VI, pp. 293,4 (May 23, 1852).
[12] Ibid., v. II, p. 413 (Aug. 20, 1851).
[13] Bode (ed.), "A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers," loc cit., p. 149.
[14] Henry D. Thoreau, The Moon (Boston, 1927), p. 55.
[15] Ibid., v. IV, pp. 162, 163 (June 29, 1852).
[16] Ibid., v. IV, p. 163 (June 30, 1852).
[17] Ibid., p. 145.
[18] Ibid., p. 195 (July 6, 1852).
[19] Ibid., pp. 451, 452. (January 6, 1853).
[20] Ibid., p. 459. (January 8, 1853).
[21] Bode (ed.), "Walden," loc. cit., p. 531.

THE ANNUAL MEETING . . .

The 1960 annual meeting will be held at the First Parish Church in Concord on Saturday, July 9th at 10:30 a.m. Speaker of the day will be Prof. Perry Miller of Harvard University, whose topic will be "Thoreau in the Context of International Romanticism." Paul Oehser will deliver a presidential address. Luncheon will be served at noon. Tickets will be limited to 150. It is recommended that reservations be mailed in in advance to Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, 22 Elm St., Concord. At the evening session, Mrs. Esther Anderson will show her photographs to illustrate Thoreau's Cape Cod journey. An amendment to the by-laws, raising the annual dues to two dollars will be voted on.

UPTON SINCLAIR ON THOREAU . . .

Your secretary has recently received the following letter from Upton Sinclair, author of The Jungle, Oil!, Boston, the Lanny Budd series, and many other notable novels:

Monrovia Calif
Mar 26 '60

Dear Mr Harding:

I am glad to say that Thoreau was an influence in my life. I lived in a hut too--only mine was a tent! Like him, I learned to stand alone, & speak truth as I saw it.

Sincerely
Upton Sinclair

Richard C. Reynolds and J. Stephen Sherwin announce that their book A WORD INDEX TO WALDEN has been accepted for publication by the University of Virginia Press. It is expected that copies of the book will be available for sale at the annual Thoreau Society meeting.

ADDITIONS TO THE THOREAU BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . WH

Ashmun, Margaret. "Thoreau's Walden." NEW ENGLAND MAGAZINE, XXXVII (Feb. 1908), 678. A poem.

Collard, Edgar Andrew. "A Yankee Looks at Montral. THE MONTREAL GAZETTE. Sept. 19, 1959. On T's visit to Canada.

Ducharme, Jacques. "An American Classic." P.E.O. RECORD (Mount Pleasant, Iowa). March 1960. On WALDEN.

Fitzhugh,Robert T. "Swapping Cultures." WALL ST. JOURNAL. March 24, 1960. On teaching WALDEN in Iran.

Gray, Leonard B. "The Attitudes of Emerson and Thoreau towards Books." CONCORD JOURNAL. March 31, 1960.

Harding, Walter. "Hound, Bay Horse, and Turtledove" in Maurice Beebe, ed. LITERARY SYMBOLISM. San Francisco: Wadsworth, 1960. pp. 59-62. Discussion of the WALDEN image.

-----. A THOREAU HANDBOOK. Reviews: AMERICAN MIDLAND NATURALIST, Jan. 1960; WESTERN HUMANITIES REVIEW, Autumn, 1959.

Harding, Walter & Carl Bode. THE CORRESPONDENCE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU. Reviews: WESTERN HUMANITIES REVIEW, Autumn, 1959; VOLUNTAD (Montevideo, Uruguay), April, 1960.

Holden, Vincent F. THE YANKEE PAUL: ISAAC THOMAS HECKER. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1958. Many comments on T's friendship with H.

Hovey, Richard B. "The Christian Gadfly: A Lay Sermon on Thoreau." EDUCATION FORUM, XXIII (Jan. 1959), 187-191. On T. as a Christian.

Howard, Leon. LITERATURE AND THE AMERICAN TRADITION. Garden City: Doubleday, 1960. 354pp. $4.50. A brief history of American literature, based on a series of lectures given before university audiences abroad. The section on Thoreau (pp. 155-160) is short and to the point, as is the whole book, but in the few pages he really gets to the heart of Thoreau's meaning, as for example in the following," Like Emerson, he wanted to reform the world by opening men's eyes to their own potentialities rather than by changing social conditions; but his method was by example rather than by evangelism."

LaForte, R.S. "The Political Thought of Henry D. Thoreau: A Study in Paradox." EDUCATIONAL LEADER, XXIII (July, 1969), 41-51.

Moldenhauer, Joseph J. "Images of Circularity in Thoreau's Prose." TEXAS STUDIES IN LIT. AND LANG. I (Summer, 1959), 245-263.

Moloney, Michael F. "Henry David Thoreau: Christian Malgre Lui." in Harold C. Gardiner, ed. AMERICAN CLASSICS RECONSIDERED. New York: Scribner, 1958. pp. 193-209.

Nelson, Truman. THE SURVEYOR. Garden City: Doubleday, 1960. 667pp. A novel about John Brown in Kansas with frequent references to Thoreau. Members of the society will recall Mr. Nelson's address on Thoreau and Brown, at the annual meeting last year, and his earlier novels, THE SIN OF THE PROPHET and PASSION BY THE BROOK.

NEW YORK SUNDAY NEWS. "Off-Beat Americans: Henry David Thoreau." March 20, 1960. An editorial: "Maybe we Americans can afford to have a few of such lazybones in every generation, to keep us aware of the fact that if all or most of us were to turn into Henry David Thoreaus, our national power, glory and well-being would depart in a matter of days or weeks."

Paul, Sherman. THE SHORES OF AMERICA. Reviews:

WESTERN HUMANITIES REVIEW, Autumn, 1959; COLLEGE ENGLISH, Jan. 1960.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH & REFLECTION. "Thoreau on Trial." 1 (Winter, 1960), 24-27. Defends Thoreau from Buranelli's recent attack.

Smith, Edwin S. "A Thoreau for Today." MAINSTREAM XIII (April, 1960), 1-24. Ostensibly a review of recent books on Thoreau, actually a penetrating discussion of Thoreau's ideas.

Thoreau, Henry D. THE HEART OF THOREAU'S JOURNALS. Review: SOUTH BERGEN (N.J.) NEWS. April 7, 1960.

-----. "Life without Principle." Trans. into Span. by V. Munoz. CENIT (Montevideo, Uruguay). Oct. 1959.

-----. THOREAU ON MAN & NATURE. Edited by Arthur Volkman. Mount Vernon: Peter Pauper Press, 1960. 61pp. $1.00. Volkman, with his sensitivity for gem-like quotations from Thoreau, and Peter Pauper Press, with its craft for fine printing, have joined in producing one of the loveliest gift-book editions of Thoreau there is. The quotations are chosen from the full range of Thoreau's works and cover topics from nature to man to God to happiness. It is remarkable how many precisely right quotations are included. The book is illustrated with actual leaf prints which are not only fully appropriate but things of beauty. This is a volume which Thoreau lovers will be happy to shower upon their friends.

-----. The Same. Review: WILMINGTON (Del.) MORNING NEWS. April 19, 1960.

Willson, Lawrence. "Thoreau's Medical Vagaries." JOUR. OF HIST. OF MEDICINE, XV (Jan. 1960), 64-74.

Yahagi, Kodo. "On the Position of Henry David Thoreau in Relation to the Formation of Americanism." TAISHO DAIGAKU KENKYUKIYO, XLIV (March, 1959), 1-40. In Japanese.

The secretary is indebted to the following for information used in this bulletin: R.Adams,T.Bailey,B.Crawford,M.Campbell,K.Cameron,B.Gronewald,C.Hoagland,G.Hendrick,G.Hosmer,A.Kovar,A.Lownes,V.Munoz, .Oehser,G.Rady,E.Teale,C.Thayer,A.Volkman,S.Wellman, and E.Wilson.

BACK FILES OF OUR PUBLICATIONS...

The following publications of the Thoreau Society are available from the secretary: Bulletins 1-9 reprinted together, 50¢; Bulletins 10,11,14-70, each 25¢; Booklets 3, 5,6,7,8,10,14,15, each 25¢; Booklets 9,11,12,13, each $1.00. Bulletins 12 and 13 and Booklets 1,2, and 4 are out-of-print, but copies may be borrowed from the secretary for photostating.

The cost of printing this bulletin was covered by a $25.00anonymous gift and the life membership of Richard C. Cook of Orono, Me. Life membership in the Thoreau Society is $25.00.

J.Lyndon Shanley has appointed the following members of a committe to arrange a special program marking the centennial of Thoreau's death, in 1962: Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, Concord, Mass.; Prof. Lewis Leary, Columbia University; Prof. John Broderick, Wake Forest College.

From an advertisement by the Dictaphone Corp. in the Oct. 17, 1959 NEW YORKER:

If Thoreau had had a Dictet with him at Walden Pond he probably would not have said that most men lead lives of quiet desperation.

When Rev. Dr. Willard Uphaus was recently sent to prison in New Hampshire for refusing to name names for state subversive activities investigators, he carried a volume of Thoreau under his arm.

Charles C. Kopp is working on a doctoral dissertation at Penn. State University, on "The Mysticism of Henry David Thoreau."

The library at the Indiana State Teachers College at Terre Haute has Thoreau's words, "In dealing with truth, we are immortal," inscribed over the main door.

"Of Thoreau I became--and for a long time remained--an ardent disciple."--John Buchan. MEMORY HOLD THE DOOR. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940. p.261. Buchan was Lord Tweedsmuir, governor general of Candda.

The Concord Antiquarian Society was recently given a silver lustre cream and sugar once owned by Thoreau's sister Sophia and presented to the society by Mrs. Thomas Todd.

The Thoreau Society, Inc., is an informal organization of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Its bulletins are issued quarterly; its booklets, occasionally. Annual meetings are held at Concord each July. Officers of the society are Paul Oehser, Washington, D.C., president; Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass., vice-president; and Walter Harding, secretary-treasurer. Annual membership is one dollar; sustaining membership, two to twenty-four dollars; life membership, twenty-five dollars. Communications concerning membership or publications should be addressed to the secretary:

Walter Harding
State University College of Education
Geneseo, N.Y.

"Go ahead! Stop forever talking about it and flee to Walden Pond!"

Drawing by Kraus. ©1960 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.